EDITORIAL

Christianity and the Visual Arts

Harold B. Kuhn*

The departure of much of contemporary painting and sculpture from the usual norms which directed the production of "classical" works has been a source of perplexity to many. All too infrequently have Christians who preferred art which was representational been at a loss to understand the rationale of that which has, for want of a more precise name, been called Modern Art. Some have been tempted to brush off the work of newer artists as a mere sharing in the general disorganization which marks the wider cultural scene. These tend to view formlessness as an indication of the absence of directing ideal, and to regard contemporary works as an extension of the wider and existential revolt against form and structure.

It is the purpose of this essay, first, to note briefly some of the figures of the nineteenth century who marked out the newer pathways, or who in the estimate of the sympathetic freed the representative arts from a bankrupt literalism. Following this, the influence of existential modes of thinking will be noted as they are given expression in the newer art. Finally, attention will be given to the manner in which the influence of the newer trends in the visual arts can be assessed, particularly in the light of the Christian's concern.

I

The departure from representation (some would say, mere representation) has occurred markedly in both painting and sculpture. Many feel that Francisco Goya was among the first to utilize the newer mood inhering in the invention of pictorial symbols designed to depart from "the expected"

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* Chairman, Department of Theology and Philosophy of Religion, Asbury Theological Seminary, and Editor of *The Asbury Seminarian.*

and to convey the irrational, first in behavior and later in concept. His painting, "The Cudgel Fight," done about 1820, seeks to show the absurdity of violence. It is, of course, a fantasy, and is designed to remove any romantic illusion (such as heroism) from the combat situation. Two men, trapped in quicksand, express their frustration by the folly of beating each other with sticks, each blow driving them deeper into the sandtrap.

Here, visual art makes little attempt to catch the realism of the human form and certainly seeks to set no rapport between artist and beholder. Rather, the artist holds all men of violence up to ridicule and seeks to inspire in the one who sees the picture both the violence and the futility of evil. Thus, he inverts the usual heroism, in which the one engaging in combat secures some form of freedom or release, and shows the fighter as inducing his own bondage.[1]

Another artist involved in the departure from "surface realism" in art in the previous century was Paul Cēzanne. He outraged some of his contemporaries with his insurgent theories and his irregular methods. Himself an inarticulate person, his paintings reflect the quest for abstraction and the intentional distortion of nature. He dreamed of reducing all natural configurations to three basic forms, the cone, the cylinder and the cube. His concern was to create a new language of the abstract, in which new expressions of the rhythms of nature might be developed. He departed widely from most forms of facsimile art and violated nearly every principle of representation practiced by the realists.[2]

Parallel to Cēzanne's work was that of the French impressionists. Prodded by some of the theories of Gustave Courbet, who was perhaps the last of his compatriots to insist upon an absolute surface representation, men like Claude Monet and Camille Pissarro insisted that visual art must discover its objects, not in terms of illustrating things as they are, but by the manner in which light falls upon them. Here was, of course, a clear indication of the relativism which was making itself felt in visual art. Monet's canvas, "Impression: Soleil Levant," furnished the title of the impressionistic "school" which ultimately found itself using methodologies in which technique became more important than subject matter. Subjects

1. *Psychology Today*, II, 4 (Sept. 1968), p. 8.
2. Sheldon Cheney, *A New World History of Art*, p. 603.

became little more than pretexts for the use of light rays of varying wave lengths.[3]

It is not surprising that Napoleon III felt constrained to create the *Salon des Refusés*, in which the public might compare the newer art with the kinds which were traditionally approved.[4] Pierre Auguste Renoir needed also the relative immunity which this Salon afforded to adventuresome artists. To him, the subject was something of a medium, in terms of which he could exercise technique in the use of color-glow and textured tints. The objective seems to have been, not representation, but the conveying of a sensuous over-impression of petal-like nature.

It is clear from the foregoing that trends were developing which should lead away from facsimile art. This trend was greatly accelerated by the development of the camera, the development of which seemed to many artists to write a period after realism in art. These argued that photography carried representation far beyond what could be done by the artist; therefore, why not seek to discover new paths in art? The real problem is, of course, whether the new non-objective forms could fulfill the hopes of those who undertook to develop them.[5]

Vincent van Gogh, is, in a sense, a transitional figure who bridged the past and present centuries. He is often regarded as typical of the expressionist school, as several anti-realistic schools are generically called. His juxtaposition of brush strokes of various depths leaves ridges of pigment which should catch light in such a way as to produce a certain riot of swirling color.[6] His work marked a stage along the path to the abstractionists, for his style found a more radical expression in the work of the *Fauves* ("wild ones"), among whom the newer form of cubism emerged. The rise of cubism is variously attributed to Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso; this form seems to many to reflect the newer mode of thinking typical of the past six decades.

II

It is fashionable to find the genius of contemporary works to inhere in the existentialist outlook. There seem to be clear affinities between

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3. *Ibid.*, pp. 574f. Cf. David M. Robb and J. J. Garrison, *Art in the Western World*, pp. 626f.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 570.
5. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, III, p. 199.
6. Cheney, *op. cit.*, p. 615. Cf. Helen Gardner, *Art Through the Ages*, p. 726.

the newer forms of art and the existentialist mood. The cubists sought to disintegrate the object, largely through the refraction or displacement of planes, and to reassemble the planes of the natural object in new combinations, discernible by the beholder, in the main, according to his inner liking. Two results emerged: First, there was an almost total abandonment of the view, attributed to Aristotle, that "art is imitation,"[7] and second, there was the introduction of the subjective mood which might best be described in the phrase, "art and involvement."

The former trend sought to dissociate the picture from the reality of that which provided its stimulus, while the second sought to "paint the viewer into the picture"—psychologically, of course. The existential meaning of this is clear to the careful beholder; it means a transition from the artist's appeal to the admirer, to the artist's challenge and stimulus to the beholder to share in creating.[8] That is to say, contemporary art seeks to dispel the passive and spectator mood by which one becomes a consumer and an uncritical patron—a consumer of the art-object, and an uncritical patron of the painter—because of a failure really to involve himself in the art-enterprise. To the new mood, the artist must not only represent, but also project and involve.

Thus, the existential mood becomes a shaping force in both the intent and the content of modern art. Existentialism emphasizes the individual, the centrifugal, the broken, the fragmented, the problematic in human existence. It abhors, with all the vehemence of nature for the proverbial vacuum, all forms of essentialism, classicism, and universalism. The existential themes found concrete expression in the displacement of planes, as in the paste-up forms of Picasso, who misplaced organs and located eyes and ears in the most unexpected places.[9] To say the least, this represented a severance from the great tradition of Western art. The distortions fostered by Picasso and by Georges Rouault are justified by critics who insist that life is like this—that life in the sense of genuine

7. *Ibid.*, p. 599.
8. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, pp. 88f.
9. As in his "The Demoiselles of Avignon," in the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

personal existence is seldom regular, structured and ordered. Rouault, especially, expressed his rage at the corrupt state of the world in this way. [10]

Cubism gave way to surrealism, a revived form of dadaism in art.[11] In its more typical form, surrealism consists in the production of fantastic or incongruous imagery in art (or literature) by means of unnatural juxtapositions or combinations. Viewed more subjectively, it is said to be the presentation upon canvas of images which rise from the subconscious self.[12] The subjective element, so typical of the existential mood, appears here, with a consequent lack of organization and structure. Surrealistic art reveled in personal data and appealed to many as being irresponsible and even perverse. Hallucination stood on an equal footing with "reality," and the outpouring of psychic contents was governed only by the idiosyncrasies of the artist.

Cubism and surrealism were largely replaced in the fifties by what is usually called Abstract Expressionism.[13] This represents the complete triumph of the nonobjective in art and affords a medium by which many artists see their task primarily in terms of producing aesthetic shock. Here, as in earlier non-representative forms, the aim was to *involve* the beholder, which is another way of saying that to the one who sees the picture is assigned the task of abstracting its central drive, and above all, its central emotion.[14]

Many of us are incapable, of course, of understanding the spatial problems which confront the painter in our day of expanding universal surroundings and in our world of systems-analysis and data-processing. The most that we can hope to do is to assess the forces which seem to provide the major stimuli to artistic creation. And it does seem that the existential mood, with its correlate of external disorganization, is very largely mirrored in contemporary art. Its lack of system, of a coherent center of organization, and of organic relation to the larger areas of experience, seems to find broad-gauge portrayal in non-portraying forms of art. We will seek to describe reasons for this in the next section.

The transition in modern sculpture from the representative to the

10. H. W. Janson, *History of Art,* pp. 513f.
11. Cheney, *op. cit.*, p. 628.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 628f.
13. Janson, *op. cit.*, p. 531. Cf. also Cheney, *op. cit.*, pp. 639ff.
14. Robb and Garrison, *op. cit.*, pp. 639f.

symbolic and non-objective has been effected in less spectacular ways, although the alterations in rationale and method have been no less revolutionary. Between Michelangelo Buonarotti (1475-1564) and Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) there were few sculptors. Many feel that Michelangelo was such a towering figure that even after his death his shadow caused all who came after him for two centuries to seem insignificant.

Auguste Rodin mastered the art of representation so fully that it seemed that sculpture could go forward in only one way, namely, away from naturalism. But Rodin himself was many-sided; in "The Thinker" or "Burghers of Calais," he seemed to be moving toward expressionism. In his "Balzac," he seems to have departed far from natural representation, so that the work reflects the inner frames of the subject and, incidentally, his own feelings.[15]

Most of the younger sculptors of the early 1900's were trained under the dominant influence of Rodin, and in going their own way, tended to pursue the lines of his later work. In consequence, sculpture moved away from the realm of objective art. Wilhelm Lehmbruck, although a German and relatively independent of the influence of Rodin, developed expressionism marked by a rare combination of strength, derived from a Gothic angularity, with the balance for which Rodin is famous.

The retreat from representative sculpture found perhaps its most elegant expression in the work of Constantin Brancusi, whose "Bird in Space" relies upon geometric formalism for its effect. With his work, it may be said that sculpture was freed of its last trace of objectivism. The way was open for the three-dimensional works of the Constructivists[16] and the machine-like works in plastic and copper of men like Antoine Pevsner, whose "Torso" seems to abandon formal discipline in favor of sculptural dadaism and to lead to the newer form of the assemblage or *collage.*

III

The deeper significance of the more recent transformations in the field of visual art deserves some further notice. Many feel that the newer form called the *collage* (French: "paste-up") is most directly expressive of

15. Cheney, *op. cit.*, pp. 643ff.
16. Janson, *op. cit.*, p. 533.

the deeper mood of contemporary life. Georges Braque is something of a pioneer in this art-style, while Picasso has utilized it in some of his canvases. Basically, a collage is a still-life made up of strips of paper or plastic, pasted together without evident plan, aided by a very few lines which may be added. It has been suggested that the basic materials are the contents of the wastebasket. An avant-garde artist named Overmeyer introduced this form about 1950 in New York. His collage was also an assembly of unrelated bits.

Later artists have painted this type of "picture," and rather than using nondescript and overlapping materials, have reproduced the style, using non-perspective style. An example of a collage modified in cubistic style is Picasso's "Guernica," in the New York Museum of Modern Art.[17]

Professor Harvey G. Cox sees this type of art as representative of what he calls the "collage man," who takes bits and pieces from the various elements of his experience and juxtaposes them in accordance with his notions. As in the visual form, his psychological assemblage may in some cases "succeed" and in others, it may "fail." What is important is that the collage is indicative, not only of a loss of what is usually regarded as order, but also that it is symbolic of the pluralism of our society.

Not only so, but the "collage man" has been conditioned by experience to "take with a grain of salt" every unit of input. Like the avant-garde artist, he is cautious about historic symbols, and admits to the assemblage of experience-units only those pieces which he can regard as relatively free of any claim upon him. This is another way of saying that the man represented by the disjointed and non-representative forms of contemporary art has abandoned the quest for any *Weltanschauung* or connected world-view. He will listen to no system or institution which makes a radical or final claim upon him. And, as Dr. Cox suggests, any religious appeal which can "get through" to him must do so in terms of a limited claim to commitment. If any religious system seeks to present to him an exclusive claim or offer to him a comprehensive world-view, it will immediately "turn him off" since any *Weltbild* which would make a final claim upon him would threaten the multi-faceted claims of the input-data with which he is confronted.

Is this type of art mere subjectivism? Paul Tillich thinks not, but finds in the dissolution of the objective form of things a movement "in

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17. *Ibid.*, pp. 522f.

favor of objective metaphysical expression. The abyss of Being was to be evoked in lines, colors and plastic forms."[18] Thus, art cannot long be a mere question of "playing games," for as Stanley Cavell notes, "The creation of art, being human conduct which affects others, has the commitments any conduct has."[19]

But within existential forms of thought-system, art does reflect, even if it does not depict, life-styles and age-moods. Non-representative forms of visual art have their overtones of estrangement and loneliness. In this they reflect an ingrained opposition to a "rational" society which by its very analytical nature threatens individual freedom and personal decision.[20] It seeks to depict "encountered reality"[21] and, in our era at least, tries to rise above both the irrelevant objectivity and the shallow subjectivity which the existential outlook reprehends.

The problem is, however, whether our visual art ought merely to reflect the mood of the time and to depict the loss of organization and system which marks the emerging "post-industrialist, pluralistic man," as Professor Cox calls him. For art can seldom, if ever, be a mere reflector; rather, it feeds back into society that which it has abstracted from it, and in so doing accentuates what it has found there. Thus, it may be asked whether the artist fulfills his obligation if he merely reflects the disjointed, the macabre, the "cool" mood. Frank E. Gaebelein reminds us: "For one of the marks of the image of God that we bear is that we, too, in our creaturely way, are makers. And in no human activity is this aspect of God's image more evident than in our making of art."[22]

Is it not time that evangelicals began to take seriously the potentialities of art for the shaping of culture, and thus to consider again the possibility that the Christian may also be an artist? Why is so much of artistic work left to those little touched by Christianity? This is not to say that the Christian artist must be a Pollyanna. Dr. Gaebelein reminds us, in this same connection, that "Beauty has various manifestations. It can be strong and astringent; it has disturbing and shocking as well as calm and peaceful moods."[23]

Certainly within this thought-context, there should be sufficient room for the Christian artist to "tell it as it is" and at the same time offer

18. Tillich, *The Religious Situation*, p. 87.
19. In W. H. Capitan and D. D. Merrill, *Art, Mind and Religion*, p. 86.
20. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, p. 105.
21. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, III, p. 72.
22. "Toward a Biblical View of Aesthetics," in *Christianity Today*, August 30, 1968, p. 5.
23. *Loc. cit.*

more than the collage. Surely the field of visual art has not reached the point at which there is no place within it for the presentation of meaningful segments of life within a frankly Christian context. It would seem that aesthetic integrity would demand something like this; we as evangelicals would welcome the appearance of the artist who could find an adequate field for committed creativity here.